



# PROLOGUE

Babai, May 1970

The commute from Bombay's financial center to Babai was living hell. Lalita's feet ached as stinking workers crushed in on her from all sides, some on purpose, and eyes like hot coals raking over her body. As the rickety bus approached her village and slowed, she mustered all her courage and jumped off. Her mood lightened on the walk home. Finally, no jerks brushing against her breasts or pinching her buttocks.

She thought about Mr. Behera, so kind and gentle. Who would have imagined the big boss's son—heir to the Behera Group—would take an interest in a barefoot Dalit, an invisible sweeper girl? He noticed her burn marks and offered to take her to a real doctor. She pictured the gold necklace he gave her, saying she could sell it if she ever needed money to escape her husband. But how could she? For someone who grew up in Bombay's sprawling shantytown, it was like owning a piece of the sun.

Lalita valued the necklace more than her life.

Most of all, she treasured the man, who treated her like a goddess. The young heir to the Behera Group was always respectful, gentle, never trying to take advantage of her. Unlike every man she'd ever known, starting with her useless father. A pair of ruddy shelducks soared above. She shook her head—if only humans were so loyal to one another!

Lalita passed the neighborhood shrine to Shiva, where a yogi sat cross-legged meditating under a majestic banyan tree. A garland of *rudraksha* seeds hung over protruding ribs. Long coils of matted hair looked like aerial roots, as if he had merged with the tree. What a blessed life, sitting day after day in a trance. No job, no chores, no money problems, and best of all, no useless husband. She had been married only two years, but that was one and a half too many. The trouble started when Ram lost his position guarding a sprawling bungalow on Malabar Hill. Soon he was drinking away her meager earnings and stubbing out cigarettes on her arms.

She finally arrived at her hut at the edge of a wide field of bright yellow sunflowers. She made herself a cup of dark-brown tea—*ek sau mil chai*, the kind that could sustain a trucker for one hundred miles. She drank from the saucer and waited for the caffeine to kick in. After checking the rice and dal for small stones, she threw a cow dung cake into the mud stove and sprinkled it with kerosene. She was about to light the fire when Ram burst through the door.

“What’s for dinner?” he yelled, slurring his words.

“What do you think,” Lalita snapped, “beefsteak?”

“How about some meat, you slut? I’m craving goat curry!”

“Then stop banging every girl in the village and get a goddamn job!”

Lalita could smell fresh coconut oil wafting from Ram’s direction. Who’s he screwing now?

“Fuck you, whore! You’re the one who’s sucking every dick at that fancy office of yours!”

On most days, the conversation would have ended there; Ram would make his way to the string cot in front of the hut, fall asleep, and snore like a bulldog until dinner. After filling his belly, he would slobber her face with kisses or rip off her sari. But not tonight. He stumbled around and kicked the earthen jug. Water gushed onto the dirt floor.

“Bastard, I got up at 5 a.m. to fetch that water!”

Ram pulled a small bottle of whiskey from his pocket, took a swig, and swaggered over to the shrine where Lalita did her daily *puja*. He grabbed the stone goddess and threw it across the room. Lalita scrambled to pick up the deity. It had landed at the foot of a small trunk, which she had recently inherited from her mother. Ram staggered over to the trunk and kicked it.

“What’s in there, anyway?”

“I’ve told you a hundred times, my wedding dress and some old clothes. Now get out of my way so I can cook.”

Ram flipped open the top and pushed the trunk over. The contents flew onto the floor. Lalita quickly charged her husband, hoping to distract him.

“What the hell is this?” he growled, picking up a folded silk sari from the wet dirt. The necklace tumbled out. Ram’s face turned red. He looked like a *rakshasa*, a wrathful deity full of bloodlust. “You tramp! Where’d you get this?”

“I bought it with money I’ve saved up.”

“Stupid liar.” He seized her by the hair and pushed her against the wall. Then he started rummaging through the items. “And what’s *this*?” he roared, holding a pen and ink drawing of Lalita dressed in a shiny green sari. The gold necklace hung from her neck. He slammed the

drawing into her face, crushing her nose.

“It’s a drawing, what do you think?”

“It’s you, isn’t it? Wearing a silk sari and that motherfucking gold necklace! Who did this?”

“Shree Behera, the big boss’s son. He likes to draw. He draws all his employees. I don’t know why.”

“Even scum sweepers like you? He gave you the necklace, didn’t he?”

“No! I told you, I—”

“He’s fucking you in the ass, isn’t he, you wench?” Ram grabbed the tin of kerosene near the mud stove. He caught hold of Lalita’s arm and dragged her behind the hut. She squirmed and struggled, finally freeing herself. She ran like the devil, but he tackled her in the neighbor’s field. He doused her with kerosene, from head to toe.

“No! No!” she screamed, her lithe body flailing like a caught fish.

Ram jammed his knees onto her legs and chest, pinning her to the ground. With his arms free, he lit a match and tossed it onto her. Then he jumped back. In seconds, Lalita turned into a living torch. She screamed, running this way and that until she collapsed in a patch of yellow flowers. A woman rushed out of a nearby shed with a bucket of water. But it was too late.